THE MARBLE SPHINX
BY ST. JOHN LUCAS

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THE MARBLE SPHINX

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THE ABSURD REPENTANCE

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POEMS

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THE MARBLE SPHINX

BY

ST. JOHN LUCAS

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THE MARBLE SPHINX

I

It was the young Greek slave Alexis who had let fall the golden cup of his master, and the cup, falling on the marble floor, was dinted in three places. Therefore two gigantic Nubians were ordered to strip the slave, and to beat him with leathern thongs that were studded with small bronze buttons. And when this was done, it seemed that Alexis was dead, for he was slender and delicate and very young. His master, therefore, bade the Nubians carry the bruised and naked body out of his sight; and they bore it a certain distance along the public highway, and flung it down where the road passes by a wood. Their lustrous black limbs and green turbans gleamed strangely in the fierce sunshine, so that all the birds that had been singing became mute at the same moment, and the zephyr held its breath. Soon they returned, chatter-

ing one to the other like huge apes; and Alexis lay like a broken flower beneath the ardour of the sun.

He lay there so quietly that the gentle, wild things of the woodland seemed to realize that he was only another victim of mankind their enemy, and after watching him from a hundred different fastnesses, they came out on the roadside, or stirred the leaves near his head. The rabbits played about his feet, the squirrels stared at him with their bright, bead-like eyes; the soft-coated shrew-mice sat up on their haunches and nibbled the seeds of the long grasses which his hands had pressed down towards the earth. A saffron-hued butterfly hovered for a moment above his brow, almost touching him with its delicate wings; and as it rose again in the heavy air it seemed as if it were his languid soul that soared in flight from those pale and breathless lips. The dim white anemones at the edge of the wood, the tall golden daffodils, and the beautiful dreamy-eyed narcissus, they too seemed to be watching him expectantly as he lay there. The petals of some daisies that grew where he was lying became dark with his blood.

Neither flower nor bird beheld any trace of life in him through the long, insufferable hours of the afternoon heat; he remained in exactly the same attitude

as when the Nubians had left him, lying on his side with his feet drawn up towards his body, his cheek pressed to the earth, and his open hands half hidden in the long grass. About an hour before sunset the fierce heat began to abate; a cool breeze heralded the dusk, and a shadow stole out from the wood and hid the scorched and scarred limbs of Alexis from the last level rays of the sun. The world gave a great sigh of relief; the animals, who had hidden themselves in the undergrowth, came forth and began once more to play in the road; the birds became garrulous, but their voices dwindled to an occasional soft cry when the serene beauty of twilight invaded the woodlands. The sun set in a wild splendour of scarlet and amber, and with the purple shadows that stole down from the hills came silence, and the silver cresset of the moon gleamed through the gaunt pines.

Yet Alexis did not stir. An owl, drifting noiselessly as an immense moth across the road, swerved as it caught sight of his body that gleamed like marble in the broadening moonlight, and the bats swooped down towards it, lured by the strange white thing that had troubled the loneliness of their dusky course. Soon all the stars came out; the calm unwavering planets, and the lesser lights that flickered as if some

great wind was roaring across the fields of heaven. The Milky Way was like a mighty bridge of snow that spanned a deep purple abyss; and when a cloud dimmed its radiance for a moment it seemed as if the dusky form of some god had passed along that shining road. The great lamps of the north moved steadily towards the zenith. The sword of the hunter was vivid with light.

Alexis lay like a tired child on the calm breast of the earth.

II

It was nearly midnight when the sound of distant voices was borne along the road in the faint wind, and the murky orange glare from a multitude of torches came to trouble the pale radiance of the moonlight. As the noise came nearer, Alexis, if he had been conscious, would have perceived that it arose from a throng which conducted a huge ivory litter hung with curtains of Tyrian purple. Within the litter two figures reclined: the one a very corpulent old man with a flushed and hideous face, and a bald head that was crowned with roses; the other, a pale girl with lips of startling scarlet and strange painted eyelids. A golden lantern hung above them, illuminating the diaphanous rainbow-hued raiment of the woman, and the loose coils of flesh in the man's throat and neck. He was drinking tawny wine from a cup that Parrhasios himself had painted; and ever and again he caressed the white shoulders of the girl with his blotched and scaly hand; but she had turned from him

and was staring into the darkness with wide, miserable eyes. The eunuchs and slaves who walked behind the litter were singing a shrill chant, and one of them was beating an accompaniment to it on a bronze gong.

The vanguard of the procession passed the place where Alexis lay without seeing him; but when the litter was near him the pale girl, who still stared into the darkness, uttered a cry, for she had seen his limbs shine in the torchlight. And she begged the old man that they should stay for a moment to see who it might be that lay there at such an hour. The old man at first refused; but she put her arms about his neck and kissed him, and then he gave the signal to halt. "It is Endymion," said he, "asleep by the roadside, but I and the gods forbid you to play the part of wanton Selene," and he laughed hideously, and caught the girl by the throat: but she bit his wrist and slipped out of the litter like a snake. The old man scowled at her and called for wine. "It is some drunken clown," he said, "snoring in a ditch, and forsooth, we waste the holy night in staring at him." He drank, cursing horribly, whilst the eunuchs laid Alexis in the road by the litter.

"It is merely a dead slave," said the chief eunuch. The old man sank back on his cushions, laughing

grossly, and called for the boy who bore his perfumes. Then he mocked the girl who stood staring down at Alexis. "It was for this," he said, "that I paid your weight in silver at Corinth and clothed you in the webs of the East, that you should halt my litter to meditate on mortality and feast your eyes on carrion. Nay, kiss him, for in truth he is young; though there is blood on his lips, his arms are smooth and shapely, and though he is a vile slave, doubtless the wife of his master found him fair."

The girl did not heed him, but remained staring at Alexis. Then the old man's voice grew shrill, and he leant over the side of the litter shaking swollen fists at her, and his little greenish eyes shone with anger. He shrieked a command to the eunuchs, and two of them seized the girl by her ankles and her shoulders and bore her to the litter. The old man clutched her throat with both his hands and thrust his face close to hers. "I am alive and he is dead," he snarled. And he repeated the words many times. She turned from him and wept. Next moment the procession began to move, leaving Alexis in the middle of the road. The torchlight flickered strangely on the trees as they went, and fantastic shadows darted across the undergrowth of the wood. The slaves and eunuchs

again began to sing their chant, and the girl in the litter wept continually, so that the paint on her eyelids ran down over her face. The old man seemed exactly like a huge yellow toad.

Alexis lay prone in the roadway, and the dew that fell on him seemed to be tears that dropped from the gentle eyes of the stars. The night waned, the moon grew faint, and the earliest murmur of the birds came drowsily from the woods. The pallid feet of the dawn had already almost crossed the threshold of the East; the faint wind was the sigh of a world that stirred in slumber. Presently a dappled hind and two tiny fawns came out of the wood and stood on the road close by Alexis; when they saw him they did not flee, but the little ones kept very close to the mother, and all three of them stared at him with curious eyes. After a long while one of the fawns even ventured to approach him, and touched his cold hand with its soft muzzle; but the hind stamped her forefoot, and the tiny beautiful thing drew back, and followed the others as they trotted easily down the road. As the light in the East grew broader, the scent of flowers began to mingle with the light breezes, as if every narcissus and hyacinth in the world had opened its petals at the same instant to hail the sun. Daylight came over the

hills like a descending god, and it seemed to Alexis that a mighty voice was crying in his ears. His eyelids stirred faintly, and he clutched the long grass with his fingers. At the same moment a slender figure came out of the wood and stood on the road near him. It was a dryad who had slept all night long beside the brook whose water was purple with mirrored hyacinths.

III

Her dark hair streamed out in the freshening breeze as she stood there gazing at Alexis; her body, with the silver-brown stems of the beeches for background, was white as milk. For a long time she stood quite still, watching him timidly; then, seeing that he did not stir, she went nearer to him, and bent down, looking at him as Psyche looked at the sleeping Erôs. She was lithe and slender as a reed that sways in the river, and her breasts were like the breasts of a young girl.

As she watched him a look of wonder came into her face, and presently she knelt by his side and touched first his hand, and then his hair that was dull with the dust of the road. It was then that the sound of cracking branches and rustling leaves warned her of the approach of some heavy-footed thing: she sprang up, ready to flee: but a burst of laughter in the wood seemed to dispel her fear. A moment later a head with pointed ears and vivid malicious eyes was peering

at her from the wattled undergrowth. She beckoned to it, and a brown-limbed, goat-footed creature leapt from the wood and stood by her side. She pointed to Alexis. The faun approached the body and looked at it. When she asked if it was a god he laughed loudly, holding his hairy sides with his hands.

"The gods die not," he said: "the animals alone die. This is an animal called a man. He has been slain by others of his kind. That is the penalty of being an animal. But the gods can never die."

He spurned the body with his horny hoof, and skipped grotesquely away into the wood, laughing still. But the dryad stooped over the body: her eyes were full of tears, and her lips quivered. And when her tears fell on the face of Alexis, it seemed to him that a gleam of light entered the black cavern of sleep in which he lay bound, and he opened his eyelids for an instant. The dryad saw this and cried out joyfully; then she put her lips to his ear and whispered to him, and it seemed to him that a soft breeze sighed through that stifling cavern. He opened his eyes and fixed them on her face. She remained there, drooping over him as a bent lily droops over its fellow that has fallen, and presently, like a tiny child, he put up a wavering hand and touched her. A wonderful thrill

ran through her body: it was as if there were some magic in his touch that changed her from a wild thing of the woods into a mortal who could feel love and pain.

She brought water from the brook in a fluted shell which she had found on the sea-shore, and moistened his parched lips, and washed the dust from his hair and the blood from his limbs. She drew him from the glaring road into the cool twilight of the wood, and made a couch of fretted ferns and antlered moss that he might lie more softly. When he slept she watched by him, and with rare herbs that a wise woman gave to her she healed his wounds. She poured warm goat's milk between his lips, and wrapped him in silky fleeces when the dew began to fall. Day after day she tended him, until a faint flush had come into his face, and he stirred more and more often in his strange sleep.

On the evening of the fifth day, when she was returning from the milking-place, she found him standing upright, staring round him as a man stares at some marvellous vision, and touching the leaves and the flowers and the smooth boles of the trees. When he saw her he uttered a faint cry of wonder, and advanced towards her with outstretched hands.

His feet faltered a little, and she ran to him and supported him. The warmth of his body told her that he was wholly healed, but as her arms touched him it seemed to her that she was smitten with a sudden and mortal sickness.

All through the night, as he slept, she sat beside him, watching the great stars that blazed steadily in the immense and sombre dome of the heavens.

IV

For many days they lived in the heart of the woods, wandering hand in hand along the dim pathways that she knew so well. She taught him the secret lore of the forest; the sweet and passionate song of the birds became intelligible to him, and the little Odyssey of the brook was translated by her lips. Gradually the wonderful peace of those lonely glades took possession of his soul; the harsh world in which he had lived became misty as a vague dream of evil remembered at noonday; men, with their noises and goings to and fro, seemed to him the puppets of some fantastic fiction; a city became an impossible thing, and he began to imagine at last that the long, cool aisles of the forest reached even to the ends of the earth. The stained years of his bondage preyed on his soul no longer. Nature granted him the liberty of forgetfulness.

And as he became the foster child of the forest, growing brown and lithe and soft-footed as the wild

things that no longer fled at his advent, so the dryad seemed to become human through her love for him; a strange wistfulness dawned in her eyes, and sometimes her heart was heavy with the birth-pangs of thought. She shunned her own kindred, and when they called to her from the trees she put her hands to her ears; and when the naïads came gliding to the surface of the forest pool, she trembled lest their gleaming arms and lily-starred hair should enmesh Alexis and lure him down to their weed-hung palaces. Often, she would question him concerning the world outside the forest; but he would look at her dreamily, and smile, and shake his head. Only once did he show her that he remembered the misery of his former years, and that was when they were near the outskirts of the forest, and a great army passed along the road, so that they could see golden helmets and silver spears flashing in the sun, and could hear the neighing of horses and the hum of a vast concourse of men, and the rhythmic tramp of their feet. It was then that a dreadful light had come into the lad's eyes, and, seizing her wrist, he had dragged her to where the undergrowth was thickest. They crouched there like two hunted animals until the tumult had died away in the distance.

It was not long afterwards that she began to feel a vague terror of the forest which had been her mother and her nurse. When she walked with Alexis at twilight, or lay by his side during the noonday heat, stealthy feet seemed to follow them, twigs snapped and dead leaves rustled in the undergrowth, and leering faces would appear and vanish between the leaves. During the night, unseen hands would steal their little store of food and water, and when they went to the pool they would find their path difficult with snares made from the tough tendrils of creeping plants. She understood by these signs that she had incurred the displeasure of her kindred, haunters of groves and streams.

Not only of her kindred. For one night, as she watched beside the sleeping lad, she heard a sound of snapping twigs and yielding undergrowth, as if some great beast were forcing its way towards her. She sprang up, and stood in front of Alexis, with her little fists clenched. The noise grew louder and louder, and then the screen of hazel boughs that protected their hiding place was parted, and a great centaur stood before her. His white hair gleamed in the moonlight, and a huge horned bow hung from his shoulders. His eyes were fierce as he looked at Alexis, who slept

calmly. Then he spoke to the dryad, upbraiding her because she had given herself to a lover who was a mortal. She listened to him meekly, but her eyes were mutinous.

"I do not know that he is a mortal," she said. "I found him lying in the heart of the dawn. There was blood on his lips, but his mouth is more to me than all the ambrosia of the gods. His body was bruised and stained, but it is fairer to me than the body of Apollo. Who shall say that he is mortal? One would think that he was the son of Endymion and the moon. One would think that Aphrodite bore him secretly in Paphos. Doubtless he is a god who has been sent on a pilgrimage through the world, and has fallen amongst thieves that know not the gods."

The centaur stamped his hoof and cried: "You who prate of the gods, hear the word of the Great God himself. Either forsake this mortal, or expect to be driven out with him from the woods into the world of men. The hunters who shall harry you forth are in readiness: a word from me will unleash all their hounds, and perchance your smooth boy shall perish as Actæon perished. Choose, therefore."

She knelt down by Alexis, who had stirred in his slumber, and, smoothing the soft hair from his brow,

said, "I have chosen." And in a moment the centaur was galloping away through the crackling undergrowth. Then she roused Alexis, and he sat up and stared at her with wide eyes that were dim with sleep.

"Come," she said.

For a moment he did not recognize her. It seemed to him that it was a woman who spoke to him. Then he rose, and hand in hand they went towards the edge of the wood.

V

They had not gone more than a few paces when the whole aspect of the forest began to change. The trees assumed fantastic shapes; their boughs seemed the heavy arms of giants that groped in the darkness for the fugitives, and the tall, uncurling fronds of the bracken resembled hooded snakes that were poised to strike. A minatory clamour of voices rose all round them; the birds woke and uttered shrill cries, and a noise like the baying of infernal hounds echoed in the hollow glades. Wandering lights flickered in the distance, and hoarse voices shouted watchwords in an unknown tongue. It seemed as if their stealthy tread had aroused the whole kingdom of the forest.

Soon they could hear heavy footsteps crashing behind them, and the laughter and wild cries of a troop of satyrs that pursued. The fugitives forced their way through the undergrowth that caught at their feet with a thousand fingers, and at last reached a broad path that led to the edge of the forest. Here

they were able to go more swiftly, and as they ran the moon danced before them in zigzags amongst the tree-tops. They could hear the roar of the hunt sweeping through the wood like the sound of a great fire.

But love lent them a speed that was even greater than the speed of fear, and at last they stood panting on the edge of the world that lay beyond the forest. As they emerged from the dusky circuit of the trees the noise of their pursuers ceased with a magical suddenness; the birds became silent, and the gnarled arms of the ancient oaks were motionless as the boughs of some stony forest beneath the sea.

For some time they stood there looking at one another, bewitched by that startling silence. Then the dryad turned and pointed towards the East. A long flaw of yellow light was broadening slowly across the horizon; the shaggy pines stood out gaunt and sharp-edged on the ridge of the low hills, and the lamps of the stars seemed to flicker and grow pale. A little wind was moaning the requiem of the night, and they could hear the faint sigh that came at intervals from the mighty breast of the sea. They watched the new heaven that was built moment by moment in the East, and then the dryad once again took the hand of Alexis.

"It is time," she said. "Come."

Even in that dim twilight he could see the mysterious glow that shone in her eyes; a lambent aura seemed to surround her, and her white figure seemed taller and more majestic. Only an hour earlier he had been astonished to find that she was like a mortal woman; and now, as she stood silhouetted against that marvellous dayspring, he could have believed that she was no mortal, but even one of the happy gods.

He followed her mutely towards the day with a strange sensation of awe in his heart. Yet at certain moments it seemed to him that he was not following her, but was still lying by the roadside where the Nubian slaves had cast him down. He even thought that, as they fared down the road, he saw his own body, and shuddered, and closed his eyes, for it had become the spoil of corruption. But when he reopened his eyes he saw nothing but his companion and the immense golden sea that was the dawn. And the songs of the birds were more lovely than any music that he had ever imagined in dreams.

VI

It was past noonday when they crossed a little range of green hills and came in sight of the immense pageant that is called the sea. The sun was gilding the innumerable crests of the waves, and the great cliff that towered above the yellow sands where the road came to an end gleamed and shimmered like a cataract of molten silver.

The wayfarers lay down beneath a feathery tamarisk that grew on the landward edge of the sands, and watched the green surges that pursued each other up the beach, broke into thin foam, and then retreated, leaving a line of shells and pebbles, and delicate seaweed that glistened in the sun.

Half a mile from the place where they had halted stood a temple of white marble with Doric columns, and above the colonnade a pediment on which the gods were carved lying at rest after their triumph over the Titans. Nearer the wayfarers, but protected from the sea-wind by a spur of the hills and a thick

grove of trees, was a villa that stood in the midst of a large garden. The garden was bright with all kinds of blossoms, which contrasted rather strangely with the sombre spires of cypress and the dusky masses of ilex that grew amongst them; slender stems of water rose from lily-covered basins, and broke into flowers of spray that dissolved into a myriad dazzling petals; the trees were full of green and purple peacocks, and pheasants whose plumage glowed like burnished copper and old bronze in the sun; iris-throated doves, and strange black and white birds from the East with grotesque scarlet beaks, whose shrill cries seemed to be the complaint of a petulant old man. A high wall surrounded the garden, but a gate of delicately wrought ironwork close to where they lay allowed Alexis and the dryad a dim vision of the delightful precinct.

The warmth of the sun seemed to grow more intense every moment; the tamarisk boughs afforded but little shade, and as they looked wistfully at the cool garden they perceived that the iron gate was not fastened, but stood slightly ajar. The dryad went towards it and peered into the garden, and Alexis, with the ghost of an old fear half aroused in his heart, followed her. But no fear could linger in one who

beheld the loveliness that awaited him beyond the gate, for all the garden was wonderful with red roses, roses that grew in great clusters near the ground, and climbed the tall trees, and clasped the knees of the statues, and hung, like Narcissus, over the edge of the marble fountain. The air was heavy with their perfume; the ground was covered with their petals, yet nowhere could Alexis and the dryad see a flower that had waned. As they went along the path which led from the iron gate towards the villa the roses hung in festoons from tree to tree, so that they seemed to be passing down a cave of red blossoms. All round them the great briars curved and interlaced in fantastic arabesques, or flung thorny arms across the path to arrest their feet, or drooped flowers that were like the dreamy faces of lovers towards their faces as they passed. As Alexis looked at them he wondered how he could ever have thought of a flower as a thing without a soul. The waves of perfume made his brain reel; it seemed to him at last that he was standing still, and that the roses were whirling in red circles round him, nodding a myriad heads in answer to some question which he had asked but could not remember; waving their arms like enchanters when they invoke some dreadful presence;

whispering some amazing secret which his mortal senses were too dull to comprehend. It seemed to him that he ran towards them with outstretched hands; then, suddenly, he heard a sound of mocking laughter, and felt a strange chill at his heart; and the air that had been red with roses seemed to become bright with blood. He saw himself lying by the roadside where the Nubians had left him.

A moment later he found that he was walking hand in hand with his companion towards a glade in the little wood. The gorgeous birds began to scream, and the grotesque black and white creatures chattered peevishly, but the dryad laughed at them, and drew Alexis towards the glade. They were now quite close to the villa, and it seemed to the lad that he could hear a murmur of faint lyres, and a single flute that wailed rather mournfully, as if some one were playing a dirge. As they entered the glade the sounds ceased.

Alexis uttered a cry of wonder. In the middle of the glade, hemmed in and bound by a thousand briars, crouched a large Sphinx carved in a marble so translucent that it might almost have been rock crystal. The body and flanks and feet were like a panther's; but the woman's head and breasts were more beautiful than anything that Alexis had ever seen, and

seemed to belong to a goddess who was bound by some cruel spell to the lithe body of a wild beast.

He remained quite still; staring with eager eyes at the Sphinx. But the dryad, when she saw the monstrous thing, uttered a cry of joy, and ran towards it, and kissed its cold lips, and caressed its marble hair, and whispered in its ear, pointing to Alexis. And then the dryad seemed to him no longer a dryad, but in very truth a goddess. And a great fear came over him; and the sunlight seemed to waver and grow pale, and the whole world became dusky as the heart of the ilex.

And the dryad continued to whisper in the ear of the passive Sphinx.

VII

They left the Sphinx after a while, and came to the open space in front of the villa. As they made their way through the roses they heard the sound of voices; and when they stood in the open space they saw a very tall and great-thewed man and a boy shooting arrows at a target. The boy had a small gilt bow, and his arrows often flew wide of the mark, but the man never failed to hit the centre of the target. Presently the boy flung down his bow with a petulant cry, and then the man turned, and perceived the intruders. He did not seem surprised by their presence, but smiled and addressed them courteously.

"You have come betimes," he said, "for the feast is not until sunset. Doubtless the cool shadows of a garden lured you hither." He called to the boy, addressing him, as it seemed to Alexis, by the name of Erôs. The boy did not heed him, and the master of the villa turned to his guests with a smile. "He is angry," he said, "because my arrows always hit the mark and his own not always."

The boy overheard him, and stamped his foot. "Not for that reason am I angry, O Thanatos," he said; "but because of all the wayfarers who enter, none are my guests, but all belong to you."

Alexis smiled when the boy addressed the master of the villa by the name of Thanatos; for the man was full of life and health, and he had always heard of Death as a pale and wasted shape. "For what reason," he ventured to ask, "does the child call you by that name?"

The master of the villa looked at him in silence for a moment, and then he answered,—

"He calls me Thanatos because I am so very strong."

But the boy cried out: "Thanatos I call him because he is less strong than I." And he frowned at the master of the villa, and Alexis smiled to see him frown. But the dryad murmured, "He speaks the truth; for love is stronger than death."

When she had spoken these words a change came over the face of him who had been called Thanatos; he scowled at the dryad and cried,—

"Death is stronger than all things. Death is stronger than the gods themselves; stronger than love, stronger than evil. O ye who blaspheme Death,

in good time have ye come, seeing that to-night is his great feast, his harvest-home!"

And the dryad looked in the eyes of him who was named Death, and said:—"The Sphinx stirs in her sleep." And Death laughed.

"Only a god can wake her," he said; "and the old gods are dead. You shall see them pass in my triumph to-night. Perchance I shall throw them crumbs from my banquet; perchance I shall beat them for vagabonds."

The dryad shook her head.

"Love can awaken the Sphinx," she said. And Thanatos laughed again. "Love!" he echoed. "Behold him!" And he pointed to the boy.

And they saw that Erôs had broken his gilded bow, and was standing over it, weeping, with his knuckles thrust into his eyes. And when he knew that they were looking at him he uttered a loud cry, and, running towards the little wood, disappeared amongst the roses. And Thanatos laughed again, and went into the villa to make ready for his guests. And Alexis and the dryad sat down by the marble Sphinx.

Soon they heard the sound of slow footsteps coming along the path, and presently an old peasant came in sight. His limbs were bent and twisted, and he

cringed painfully beneath a heavy load of faggots. When he was quite near them he let down his load to the ground and crouched beside it, bemoaning the misery of his lot. He spoke of his hard-hearted sons, who forced him to work all day in the fields when he had reached the last fleeting years of his life; he complained of the barren earth, and told them how the gods had grown deaf to the prayers of the poor, and only showered their favours on tyrants and kings. His voice trembled and grew shrill, and he waved skinny arms in the air, denouncing his unnatural sons.

Quite suddenly Alexis was aware that the master of the villa was standing beside him. The old man looked at him with his dim, rheumy eyes, and continued his imprecations. At length the master of the villa interrupted him.

"Your story awakes my pity," he said, with a little smile playing about his lips. He looked at the gems on his hand for a moment and then, taking off a ring, he gave it to the old man, and said,—

"If you wish to be revenged on your sons, take this emerald, and when it is on your finger, command them to come hither and be my slaves The power of the ring will prevent them from disobeying you, and

as soon as they are chained you can sell the ring and live in wealth and honour for the remainder of your days."

The old man looked doubtfully at the emerald; and the dryad spoke. "Believe him," she said; "for he is mighty."

"Mighty indeed he seems," said the old peasant; "by what name shall I know him?"

And the dryad answered: "He is called Death."

The old peasant flung down the ring. "My sons are sprung from my loins," he cried, "and when their mother lived the hard world was a heaven to me." And muttering strangely, he lifted up his bundle of faggots and went slowly away. And Death laughed and returned to the villa.

Alexis looked at the Sphinx, and as he did so his heart grew cold with awe. For it seemed to him that a light shone for a moment in her blank eyes, and that her immobile lips were parted.

VIII

And as they sat by the Sphinx they heard again the sound of footsteps beneath the roses, and soon a fair, wanton woman appeared in the glade. She was clad in a flame-coloured robe that hung from a jewelled girdle beneath her breasts, and her eyes were painted in the manner of harlots.

When she saw them she laughed delicately, and cried, "Hail, O naked ones! Is not this the garden of Thanatos? I am come hither for the purpose of bargaining with him. Lead me to him, I pray you, little naked ones."

Even as she spoke, Thanatos stood among them. "I am he with whom you would bargain," he said. She laughed again, and going towards him, laid hold of his garment familiarly. "This is the bargain I would make," she said. "For twenty years men have lusted for me, and have poured gold into my coffers and jewels into my treasury. The house where I dwell is splendid with my sin; I have taken kings from the arms of queens, and provinces from the

hands of kings; and the gods themselves, it seems to me, have lain with me on beds of ivory and silver. But now I wax weary of splendour; all abominations have I enjoyed, and my heart is as lead between my breasts. And this is the bargain that I would make with you, Thanatos. I will sell you all the splendid and shameful days that are left to me if you will only let me drink at the golden fountain which men say is in your garden,—the fountain of Oblivion."

Thanatos looked at her for a moment, and asked, "Why do you desire to drink of it, O woman?"

She answered languidly, looking at him from the corners of her slanting eyes: "Because thought has become a burden to me. Because the flaming legions of my old sins tramp through my brain from moonrise to moonset. Because every lovely thing that I see is married in my mind with some long-dead lust. Because I would be free from thought, even as the chaste, who live, and never think. To live without memory of my life,—that is my desire."

Thanatos smiled slightly, and shook his head. "All the water of my golden fountain will not cleanse the stained garment of your soul," he said. "It is your imagination that is soiled, and for such there is only one cleansing fount."

She cried out eagerly: "Its name?" And Thanatos answered,—

"The fountain of death."

She looked at him with bewildered eyes, and was about to speak, when the boy Erôs came swiftly from the trees towards her. "He has lied to you," he cried, pointing to Thanatos; "in my fountain even your stained raiment shall be cleansed."

And she cried again, "Its name?"

"It is called the fountain of love," he answered.

And suddenly the woman bowed her face in her hands, and wept wretchedly.

As she walked from the garden Thanatos called to her. "Forget not my feast to-night;" he cried. But she took no heed. And the eyes of Erôs were heavy with pain as he watched her go.

And as she reached the edge of the wood another figure issued from it, passed her with a laugh, and came towards Thanatos and Erôs and the guests. The newcomer was a magnificently formed young athlete, bright-eyed and glowing from his exercise in the palæstra. He strutted up to them with his hand on his hip and saluted them.

"Hail, O Thanatos!" he cried. "It is reported that Hercules wrestled with Death and overcame him.

Are you willing to try a fall with one whom the odes of poets proclaim mighty as the son of Alcmene?" And he stiffened his arms so that the muscles stood out on them like great cables, and squared his mighty shoulders. The master of the villa looked at him with the strange smile still playing about his lips.

"I will wrestle with you," he said; "but not now. Perhaps when your heart is faint after the pentathlôn, or when you have grown fat and sluggish, or in the debauch that follows some great victory, you will find me stripped and oiled and ready. For all your toil and training is but a preparing for the last conflict in which every athlete is overcome. Meanwhile, you may wrestle with my brother, with Erôs."

The athlete seemed surprised.

"Erôs?" he asked. "Who is Erôs? Is he not a character in the Comic Poets?" And when Thanatos had pointed to the boy, the Ephebus laughed.

"Wrestle with him!" he cried: "he is smooth and soft as a girl. Let him stay at home and tend the hares that his admirers send to him. With one of my hands I could snap him as one snaps a dry reed. He a wrestler!" And he went away. And as he

went Thanatos cried after him, "Remember the feast!" The athlete waved a mighty arm in response as he disappeared amongst the trees.

Erôs was still weeping, and Alexis wondered at his tears. But the dryad said: "How could he not weep, beholding the thing that murders love daily and hourly?"

Alexis was astonished, and asked what the thing might be which had such terrible power.

"Self-love," she answered. And before he could question her further they heard a strange tumult amongst the trees, and presently two figures emerged and came towards them; the one running, the other limping slowly.

IX

The first figure which approached them was that of a naked and very filthy man. He wore a crown of bright rags: his long black hair was mingled with straw, and hung down over his eyes and below his shoulders: he gnashed his teeth incessantly like a horse that is galled by the bit. A drum hung from his shoulders, and as he approached them he began to beat it violently with two sticks that seemed to be human thigh-bones.

"Hail, O Death!" he cried, halting in front of Thanatos, and executing an infernal flourish on the drum. Then he bowed grotesquely to the others, so that his matted hair flapped in front of his face and hid the gleaming yellow-white of his eyes. Thanatos frowned at him.

"Why do you come here?" he asked, "troubling the peace of my garden with your drumming? You at least have no grudge against me. I never concern myself with the mad, but allow them to live happily to a great age. Why do you trouble me?"

The madman, who had been leaping to and fro to the sound of the drum whilst the master of the villa was speaking, became suddenly quiet, and assumed a grotesque attitude of dignity.

"Good Death," he said, waving one of the thigh-bones; "may I say that you are unsympathetic? I am quite aware of the deference with which you treat my kin, and I came to offer you my gracious thanks; my thanks, oh supreme philanthropist. Little naked people," he continued, turning towards the dryad and Alexis, "little naked people, rejoice, for to you it is granted to behold the meeting between the two great despots of the world; the meeting between King Death and the King of Life." And he began to drum furiously.

Thanatos made signs to him to cease. "My friend," he said, "you fatigue me. Why do you imagine that you are King of Life?"

The madman assumed an expression of intense cunning.

"I know," he said; "I know that I am king, because no mortal is happier than I. And I will tell you a secret. Night after night the gods have come to me, one by one, and have abdicated in my favour. One by one, also, they have become incarnate in me. I am

the Olympian Zeus, hurler of Thunder!" he screamed suddenly, and held the thigh-bone as if it were the levin-bolt that he was about to launch in flight. Then his voice broke in a shriek of discordant laughter, and he drummed again.

"But in truth," he continued after a moment, "it was not only for this that I manifested myself to you. I came hither because I know that you are a poet, a great creator who continues eternally to re-fashion and modify the shifting and disintegrating earth. I am not a poet, for I am the happiest of men: I came, therefore, to beg you to give me some words that I may sing to my sweet instrument." He performed a roll on the drum. "Do you hear the thunder of Zeus, little mortals?" he asked.

Thanatos was staring moodily at him.

"I will give you some words," he said, after a moment; "and you and your kin shall sing them all over the world. Their refrain is this:—*The Gods are dead, and Death is God.*"

The madman looked bewildered. "Are the words true?" he asked. "My kin are very particular about truth."

"They are not true," said Erôs, coming forward, "but I will give you a refrain that is truth itself. And

the refrain is this :—*The Gods are dead, but Love yet lives.*"

"Love, love, love," hummed the madman, tapping his drum, "that word sounds out of tune."

"I will give you a refrain to sing," said the dryad, "and it is this :—*The Gods are dead, the God remains.*"

The madman stared at her. "The God?" he cried. "What God? Do you mean Pan, little naked one? They say that Pan is dead, but I will not believe it as long as I can dance and drum and beget children, for he is the only god who never came to me by night with his abdication. But he is merely a simple fellow and the friend of the wise madman."

As the madman said the word Pan, Alexis observed that the master of the villa grew pale, and put his hand to his brow as if he were dizzy.

"I tell you that the gods are all dead," he cried angrily.

The madman thumped his drum. "So be it," he said. "Your refrain, at any rate, has more artistic merit than the others. I will teach it to my kin. Here comes one of them : he used to be a philosopher, and so has become a leper. He is covered with the

scabs and sores of thought. Hail, comrade. Make obeisance to the king my brother!"

The other intruder had by this time crawled up to the group in front of the villa. He was a leper in the most dreadful stage of his dreadful disease; his voice was like the hoarse cry of a living man in a grave. He dragged himself to where Thanatos was standing, and fell at his feet.

"A boon, O mightiest of kings," he groaned. "Be merciful; for I, too, was once a king, a king of thought. All the subtleties of Greece were mine, and the mystic lore of the Indians, the Gymnosophists, with whom I abode long."

And Thanatos said, "What boon think you that I can bestow on a king of thought?"

The leper groaned and answered: "Surely there is but one boon that the wise man would desire of you, O king."

And Thanatos smiled like one who is flattered by a courtier, and said, "I perceive that it is the boon of death that you crave. And, indeed, other philosophers as wise as you have come to me desiring the same gift, yet they were not leprous."

But the leper cried with a shrill voice, and said: "There are no other philosophers who are as wise as I

am. And it is not death that I desire, but life, O Thanatos. Promise me that I may live for another year. Nay, I will not go hence unless you promise. By the dog of Egypt, I will not go."

Then Death smiled in scorn, and said: "Have the Greeks and the Indians taught you their lore in vain, O foolish, wise man? Or are you, like all other philosophers, on the brink of some profound and ridiculous discovery? Is this the reason of your insane desire for life?"

The leper answered: "Nay: but because with certain rare herbs I have made much strong drink, which will not ferment until the summer be past. Grant me, therefore, to live until this wine is become like liquid fire through fermentation, that I may drink, and forget my disease, and my philosophy, and die."

And Thanatos laughed and said, "You are wiser than I supposed, O leper, and therefore your request is granted."

And the leper fawned at his feet, crying, "O bountiful Death! In a good hour my friend conducted me to your home."

And the madman danced round him, beating the drum. "Hail to the King of Kings!" he sang, "The Gods are dead, and Death is God,—the God of madness

and philosophy is supreme." Then he pointed to the temple which stood on the green hill above the villa. "It was the temple of Athene," he said, "but she is dethroned; Death reigns in her place; she must go begging through the world, and knowledge with her. Oh, a rare sight, to see knowledge turned prostitute for the sake of a little bread! But because I loved her once, she shall not go naked: by the dog, as our friend here would say, she shall wear my drum!"

And banging the drum with great strokes, he began to run in the direction of the temple. After he had gone a short distance he halted, and, looking back, called to the leper.

"Come, my King of Thought," he cried, "come to the shrine of Wisdom and Death. Hasten, O majestic one, lest the poor goddess set forth on her planetary way without this indispensable music. The Gods are dead, and Death is God. Come, my dog of Egypt, come!"

He gave a last flourish on the drum, and again began to run towards the temple. The leper followed him, crawling swiftly on his hands and knees, and his leprosy glistened in the sunshine as he went.

X

When the sound of drumming had died away in the distance Thanatos re-entered the villa, Erôs disappeared in the wood, and Alexis and the dryad went to the glade where the great Sphinx lay couchant. Alexis was eager to question the dryad concerning the strange events that they had witnessed, but the changed aspect of her form and the serene radiance of her eyes compelled him to be silent. She wound her arms about the neck of the Sphinx and gazed at the sightless marble as a lover gazes at the face of his beloved when she sleeps.

Alexis lay down at the feet of the monster, and presently a great black butterfly fluttered from the roses, touching his brow with its wings. It seemed to be the messenger of some drowsy spirit that dwelt among the flowers; for no sooner had it touched Alexis than his eyelids drooped, and he slept as deeply as the Sphinx herself. The dryad glanced at him and then began to whisper in the cold ear of the carven thing that she embraced.

When he awoke the sun was low in the heavens and the cry of the birds had changed. He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and glanced about him. The dryad was sitting near him, and by her side was the boy Erôs. Between them lay the golden bow, no longer broken but tightly strung and with a purple-feathered arrow fitted ready to the string. The boy was talking earnestly to the dryad, who uttered a word in reply at intervals. Alexis could not hear what they said, and after a moment lay down again and stared drowsily at the roses that were darkly outlined against the fading sky.

Some time afterwards, when the torches of the West began to burn, he became conscious of a rhythmic chant that rose and fell with the breeze of the evening, so that he at first imagined the singers to be sitting on some hill far away ; but soon he realized that the sound had gradually approached nearer and nearer to the place where he was lying. Presently the chant ceased, and he heard the tramp of feet and a tumult of disputing voices in the road beyond the little wood; there was a short silence, and then he saw a small procession of white-robed slaves that conducted an ivory litter with purple hangings. In the litter lay the bloated man and the pale girl

who had seen Alexis as he lay bleeding by the roadside.

When the litter had reached the glade where the Sphinx lay, the old man caught sight of it and commanded the slaves to halt.

"A rare work of art," he cried, staring at the Sphinx with his little bloodshot eyes. Then he turned to his chief eunuch. "Ask the two slaves whether this be not the villa of Thanatos?" he said.

The girl who was looking at Erôs, tossed her head and said, "You grow blinder and blinder day by day, old fool. Do you not perceive that they are three?"

The old man stared and blinked, and cried angrily: "Do you mock me again? By the gods there are but two." And he pointed his fat finger at Alexis and the dryad. "One, two," he counted.

And the girl pointed to Erôs, and said, "Three."

But the old man struck down her hand, saying that it was ever her wont to mock him and to make him distrust the testimony of his own eyes.

He was still murmuring and rubbing his eyes when the blast of a mighty horn that was blown from the villa echoed and re-echoed amongst the trees, and Alexis, whose right arm had been resting on the flank of the Sphinx, uttered a cry of amazement, for it

seemed to him that as the horn sounded the body of the monster had stirred and quivered. The old man sat up in the litter and stormed at his slaves. "Forward, dogs!" he cried: "it is the fanfare that announces the banquet of Thanatos, whereat I am chief guest." The slaves hurried on, and his gross body reeled with the movement of the litter. The girl leant out, staring at Erôs until the roses hid him.

And Alexis said, "Wherefore did the old man think that we, who are three, were but two?"

Erôs answered: "It is not granted to men of his kind to behold me." And he took up his arrows, which had lain between the paws of the Sphinx, and began to go towards the villa.

"It is time," he said. "Come."

They followed him. And as they went a whisper that was like the rustle of innumerable roses murmured in the glade, and a myriad soft voices echoed the words of Love. And when Alexis looked back, it seemed to him that he could see the eyes of the Sphinx gleaming in the dusk.

As they came near the villa the thrilling blast of the horn sounded a second time.

XI

All the West was a tumult of colour, a giant conflict between tawny light and livid leaden-hued cloud, and the noise of distant thunder was like the cry of a world in travail. A little feverish wind moaned about the cypresses like a tortured ghost.

Thanatos met his guests at the door of the villa. He was clad in white raiment bordered with gold, and was crowned with a garland of starry white flowers. His face was flushed and his eyes glowed; he seemed like one who had drunk some rare and wonderful wine. He stood in a superb attitude on the threshold, and smiled graciously at Alexis and the dryad, and laughed when he saw Erôs.

"Hail, little brother!" he cried: "I knew that, in spite of all your protests, you could not resist my banquet. But do you think that it is seemly to come armed with arrows to the feast of Death? By the ghosts of the gods, it is not seemly. Put down the bow, lest you alarm my guests."

Erôs smiled, and loosened the string of the golden bow, and hung it from his shoulder. "It is only a toy," he said. "You yourself have often said so."

And Death laughed softly, and murmured, "Yes, it is but a toy. Enter, I pray you, for the guests await our coming." And he led the way, laughing and jesting with Erôs. They passed through a great hall that was fragrant with many flowering myrtles and cool with splashing fountains, and entered the banqueting chamber. It was a very long lofty room hung with innumerable strands of roses, and lit with lamps that had the soft glow of milky opals. One side of it was open to the night and the scent and coolness of the garden; and beyond the roses that climbed about the colonnade Alexis could see the dim road that wound towards the shore. A great yellow moon was rising, and the sea below it was like an immense disc of fluted silver.

The room was full of guests when they entered; men and women of every age and nationality were reclining by the long tables that were laden with golden vessels, and strange fruits, and gleaming wine in delicately-painted amphoræ. Some of the guests had crowns of gold; a few dark-faced kings from the

east of the world wore jewelled mitres ribbed with silver; but the greater number, like Thanatos himself, had garlands of white flowers. They were attended by many slaves who were all dressed exactly alike, and were of the same stature; and presently Alexis realized that their faces also exactly resembled each other, and that the colour of their hair and eyes was the same. It was as if he could see the image of one slave reflected a hundredfold in a series of mirrors. From an alcove that was shrouded with roses the music of faint flutes and lyres drifted across the banquet; when it grew louder the opaline lamps became more bright, and when it died mournfully the chamber became dim, and the figures of the guests seemed to be hung about with thin mist. When Erôs entered, the music rose for a moment to a loud and triumphant chord; but Thanatos frowned and stared at the alcove, and the flutes became faint. The master of the villa led his guests to the table at which he himself lay; near them Alexis could see the bloated man and the pale girl who had been borne past them in the ivory litter, and the athlete, who was crowned with parsley, and the fair wanton woman with her stained eyelids and gilded breasts.

Thanatos made a sign to the slaves, and they began to set rare delicacies before the guests, and to pour out the purple and tawny wine. Alexis gazed at the dreamy faces of those who lay near him, and it seemed strange to him that the food which he tasted was real food, and that the wine was fiery and sweet-scented as a Chian vintage. No one spoke a word; not even a whisper passed between those who lay shoulder to shoulder, but the music continued its endless symphony until it seemed to Alexis that those strange pipes and strings must have begun to sound before the beginning of time, and would at last play the dirge of the dissolving world. He looked at the dryad. Her face seemed to glow with a luminous whiteness in the dusk, and her eyes were fixed immovably on the eyes of Erôs, who was gazing pensively at a flower that he held in his hand. He looked at the other guests: he seemed to recognize some of their faces; yet when the lamps grew dim it was as if each of them put on a mask which made him exactly like his neighbour.

He was still glancing idly from face to face, when the music became suddenly sinister with drums and rattles; the flutes wailed, the lyres groaned like trees in a fierce wind. The melody descended in a shuddering scale to a snarling discord, and ceased.

At the same moment the lad saw that all the vague eyes of the guests had become vivid, and were focussed on a certain point of the room. The master of the villa stood there leaning an indolent hand on the shoulder of his neighbour and looking at his guests.

XII

A HOARSE murmur ran through the room, followed in a moment by intense silence. Thanatos smiled slightly, and then began to speak.

"My friends," he said, towering above the assembly, "you have been silent whilst Time was in travail with the hour of my triumph. Rejoice now, for the hour is born. The Gods are dead, and Death is God!"

Instantly the multitude was on its feet, shouting the words, waving their arms, and throwing their crowns and their garlands at the feet of Death. He made a sign to the musicians in the alcove; the lyres and flutes broke into a dance-measure, and the pale girl rose from the couch where she lay beside the fat old man and passed swiftly to an open space in the centre of the room. Her eyes stared glassily at Death, and she moved like one who walks while sleeping. She halted in the open space, and Alexis saw that she was standing in the centre of a circle of skulls. She stood

for a moment staring straight in front of her, and then her limbs drifted into the slow and intricate measure of the dance. She moved to and fro like a swaying flower; and the roses leaned down towards her, and the stars of the white clematis were tremulous as her hands. She moved like a ghost round the circle of skulls, her arms weaving and re-weaving subtle arabesques in the dusk; her eyes dilated and aflame with a strange ecstasy. The crimson flower at her breast glowed like an immense jewel. The drought of some terrible passion had made her scarlet mouth grow pale.

It seemed to Alexis that for many hours he watched her tirelessly weaving that endless chain of soft colour, when a gong sounded one deep note, and the music quickened suddenly. The opal lamps became brilliant, and the dancer began to whirl round the skulls. They grinned at her, and their hollow eye-sockets gleamed as she passed. Again the gong sounded; the music became fiercer and more shrill, and castanets and husky rattles beat out the mad measure. The feet of the dancer were like petals that fled before a great wind; her body flew to and fro like the driven foam of the sea. The brooch at her shoulder snapped asunder as she danced, and her robe fell, revealing her

white flanks and her breasts, and clinging about her loins as wet weed clings to the swimmer. Bending low, without ceasing to dance, she cast it from her, and at the same moment caught up two of the skulls. Then the music broke into a loud and triumphant melody, and the dancer, with a skull held aloft in either hand, whirled round and round so fast that the eye could no longer follow her gestures, but could only perceive a concentric series of spinning circles in which white limbs flashed like the limbs of one who drowns in a vortex of bubbling foam, and where the loosened hair of the dancer and her scarlet mouth and the grinning teeth of the skulls were all mingled like a madman's dream. When the music ended in a wild chord of triumph she flung the skulls so that they fell with a crash at the feet of Thanatos. But she herself fell down before Erôs, and her hair lay spread about his feet, and she touched him with her hands. Erôs took no heed of her, and continued to gaze pensively at the flower that he held.

But Thanatos stood up, having a skull in either hand. And when he spoke it seemed to Alexis that the other skulls, those which remained in the circle where the girl had danced, rattled their teeth and jostled one another. And Thanatos cried: "O

friends, who have come hither to witness the Triumph of Death, behold the emblem of his authority. This is he that was Pericles, a man of wise counsel, and esteemed above all in his day, and one who established the prosperity of the great city Athens."

And the bloated man, who was exceedingly drunk with wine, shook his fists at the skull, crying, "Away with him, for he was a tyrant. He had no conception of democracy. The Gods are dead, and I am God. Away with the tyrant." And he leant his head on the edge of an amphora and wept as he thought of his own greatness. And the harlot and the athlete mocked him.

But Thanatos called to a slave, and bade him bring a garland: and he crowned the skull of Pericles. "Behold the last apotheosis!" he cried. "This is he who made Athens mighty, yet in a few years he was as if he had never been, and his city became a vassal of meaner races." He dropped the skull on the floor. But the dryad cried out suddenly,—

"Believe him not, for he knows that the name of the man whom he has reviled will endure as long as the enduring world." And Thanatos frowned and held up the other skull.

"This man," he said, "was a mighty poet in his day, and honoured by the Greeks. He was called Euripides; and he helped to spread the foolish legend that Death was vanquished by the son of Zeus and Alcmene. Behold him! make obeisance, O people, to the madman who believed that Death was vulnerable! In a few years his name, aye, and the language that was his, will be forgotten."

And the guests laughed at the skull, but the dryad cried: "The words that he wrote shall be a wonder and joy to men when Death himself is dead."

The guests snarled like dogs at her; but Death laughed and took another skull in his hand.

"Lo, the skull of Helen," he said: "for whose sake the tall towers of Ilion fell headlong, and the heroes died in the dusty plain, and the gods themselves suffered wounds. Her body was sweet with strange perfumes, and the breath of her hair made men mad. But she grew old, and her bright hair became grey and thin; yea, Helen, the desire of Heaven, became a bald and withered hag who was fain even in summer to crouch over the fire. And then she was content to die, for Menelaos was palsied and querulous, and was ever upbraiding her concerning Ilion and Alexander; and the words were empty noise to her, and signified

nothing." And he took up another skull that was foul and green with weed, and its eye-sockets were filled with blue clay as if it had lain for many years in the bed of a river. "Behold Antinoüs the fair Bithynian!" he cried. "The emperor of the world was his slave, and a holy city was built in his honour. The grand sculptors carved him as Dionysus, and crowned him with the curling tendrils of the vine, but the Nile gave him to me crowned with green weed, and his fair face was mottled and sunken, and the mud of the river blinded his dreamy eyes."

And it seemed to Alexis that as Death held up the skull a company of armed men with smoky torches conducted a litter down the winding road that led to the sea, and that a mournful voice from the litter cried the name of the Bithynian many times. And the light of the torches gleamed on a great eagle of gold that surmounted one of the standards borne by the soldiers. But when he looked out into the night again he could see nothing beyond the trellised roses but the moon and the wrinkled silver of the sea.

And Death pointed to the circle of skulls, and began once more to speak. "These are they who died at Marathon for Greece," he said; "but to-day Greece is the slave of Rome, and to-morrow, perchance, both

Rome and Greece shall have perished. Behold their foolishness, and the fruit of their toil and their wounds; to establish an empire that endured for an instant!"

But the dryad cried: "Happy are the dead who fell at Marathon, and their renown shall never fade, for they crushed the barbarian, and set up the frontier between light and darkness, and the wall between the East and the West." And Death frowned, and was about to upbraid her, when a mighty voice that cried aloud in the garden brought all the guests except Erôs and the drunken fat man to their feet.

XIII

The great voice uttered one brief cry, and then perfect silence reigned in the garden. So strange and terrible was the sound that the guests seemed to be smitten with panic, and stared at each other with wild eyes, and muttered confused words. But the dryad ran to Erôs, who still stared at the flower in his hand. "The Sphinx awakens!" she cried. But he did not heed her.

Then Death made his voice heard above the uproar so that it sounded like the clang of a brazen bell. "The Sphinx has cried aloud," he said, "to herald the passing of the Gods. Be silent, O vassals of Death, be silent, and behold the triumph of your king."

He had scarcely finished speaking when from the hill where the great temple stood there came the roll of a drum, almost inaudible at first, but swelling rapidly to a furious thunder. A horn sounded, and the lyres and flutes began to play a wailing dirge that alternated with a majestic and triumphant march. The lights went out, and all the guests crowded to the side of the

room that was open to the sea, and watched the road. The vast white figure of Death stood on the balustrade with a skull in his hand.

The road was flooded with soft moonlight, and at first Alexis could see nothing in all its length from the hill to the shore; but presently he realized that a strange pale shape was moving very slowly down it towards the sea. The pale thing crept along the road like a huge insect, moving jerkily from side to side, pausing, swaying its body like a moth whose wings are scorched. The sound of the drum grew louder; the drummer was still invisible, but apparently he was descending the hill and following the pale thing in the road.

When it was close to the villa it halted, and turned the semblance of a human face towards the guests. "Hail, O Death, oh, bountiful Death!" it cried, and fell prone, waving arms that were like the tentacles of some horrible monster of the sea. Alexis realized that the white thing was no other than the leper who had accompanied the madman to the garden of Death,—the leper who was wise with all the wisdom of earth and had made a little strong drink for himself. "Hail, hail, O Death!" he cried a second time, and continued to crawl towards the sea.

The roar of the drum became intense, almost intolerable; it seemed to Alexis to fill the whole world.

The naked madman, still crowned with rags, came down the road, dancing with lewd gestures, waving the human bones round his head when he raised them from the drum, and screaming a shrill pæan in honour of Death. He did not pause as he came near the villa, but went along the road without turning his head to look at the concourse of guests. His eyes blazed in the moonlight, and his yellow fangs gleamed as he shouted his song of triumph. As he passed, Death, who was watching the road behind him, uttered a great cry which was taken up by the guests.

For a dreadful procession became visible in the bright moonlight as it descended the hill. Its vanguard consisted of a rabble of strange shapes; shapes of women with a hundred breasts, shapes of men with the heads of bulls and hawks and monkeys. The monstrous divinities of the East rode past on tigers and elephants that were caparisoned with live serpents, and in dragon-drawn chariots the hideous bulks of a thousand idols rocked stupidly to and fro.

And when these obscene ghosts had passed the villa, Alexis perceived a tattered regiment of worn and

cringing persons that crept along the road. And Death uttered a great cry.

"Behold the Olympians!" he cried; "O miserable race of men, behold your gods!"

When he had spoken, Alexis realized that the old man who headed that motley company bore some likeness to certain statues of Zeus which he had seen; but the hair of the old man was sparse and grey, and his knees were bent, and he tottered as he walked. An eagle with the bald neck and scurfy eyelids of a vulture hopped grotesquely behind him.

In each of the lamentable figures that passed Alexis could see a resemblance to one of the gods; but they had all suffered some strange defilement: Apollo was a shivering slave who carried a broken lyre, Aphrodite was painted like a harlot, and made wanton signs with her skinny arms; Hermes was lame, and Athene, like the madman, carried a drum, and her wise eyes had become vacant and foolish, and her tongue lolled from her open mouth. Each of the other gods in like manner had endured some peculiar defilement. And Death jeered at them as they passed.

"Oh! you are old!" he cried, "and lean from the lack of ambrosia. But I would not have them starve, O friends," he continued, turning to the

guests; "let us cast food amongst them; perchance they may deign to eat of the scraps from the table of Death."

The guests obeyed, and hurled broken bread and meat and the rind and core of fruits. And the Olympian gods fought ravenously for the morsels, striking each other, and grovelling on the ground. And Death laughed and said, "Behold the majesty of these gods! Begone, O beggars, lest I bid my slaves to whip you hence. Begone, I say, for I have counted you, and find none missing of those who lorded it in heaven."

And the gods crept away, gnawing their scraps of bread and of meat. But the dryad cried:—"He is not with them! Pan is not among them, but still reigns." And Death dropped the skull that he held, and cursed her. But she cried again: "Pan is not dead! He lives to avenge the old gods whom ye have reviled." And the whole concourse shouted with mirth. But no sooner had their shouting died away than a great cry arose in the garden; and the blood of Alexis turned cold as he heard it.

And Erôs dropped the flower that he had been holding, and glanced at the dryad.

XIV

And as Death began to speak, an immense shout of fear arose from the concourse of guests, and they who stood nearest the garden thrust back those that were behind them, and some of the tables and couches were overthrown, and the wine dripped and lay like blood on the ground. Death towered above them, crying to them to be silent; but his face was whiter than the face of the leper who had hailed him, and a dreadful light shone in his eyes. And the concourse of guests gathered round him, crying, "The Sphinx, the Sphinx! Manifest thy power, O Death, and save us from her claws and her cruel teeth!" And they clamoured for lights; and when the opal lamps glowed amongst the roses Alexis saw that the great Sphinx was standing on the threshold. Its eyes gleamed, and it lashed its flanks with its tail. Its lips were parted in a strange smile. It advanced into the room, treading softly like a huge cat, and the women screamed, and the dark kings of the East

drew their swords. But one of the women, the harlot who had begged in vain for the water of oblivion, ran towards the Sphinx, and fell on her knees before it, and embraced it with her arms, and spoke wanton words to it. And the Sphinx bit her very gently where the throat meets the breast; and she fell back dead, and her gilded bosom shone in the lamplight. All the guests cried out again, and the kings brandished their swords, but none dared to attack the monster.

Then Death snatched a great spear that no man might wield, for the shaft was of bronze, very long, and thick as a warrior's arm. He poised the javelin, and it sang through the air, and smote the Sphinx in the throat, breaking into three pieces. And when the guests saw that the Sphinx was unhurt they howled like jackals, and crept behind the tables and couches, imploring Death to aid them; and some called on the gods whom they had but lately mocked. The fat man, whose face was the colour of yellow ashes, cried out that he was a prætor, and that if any evil thing befell him, the Emperor would avenge him with a mighty army. Then he gathered up his robe and made a rush for the space that opened on the garden. The Sphinx allowed him to pass, but as he reached the

open space two great briars descended from the trellis of roses and held him ; and he screamed and struggled like a sow that is enmeshed in a network of thorny brambles.

The Sphinx crouched on the floor, staring at Death, and smiling. Then Death turned to Erôs, and cried: "The bow, the golden bow, little brother! Shoot swiftly, I pray you."

But Erôs smiled, and answered: "How should my bow, which is a toy, avail? Have you not often said that you were stronger than I?" And he lay down on the floor, and watched the Sphinx. Then Death seized a great sword that a slave carried, and breaking through the guests, he whirled it round his head in a circle of flame and smote the Sphinx. The sword broke into a myriad fragments, and Death flung down the hilt, and stared at the Sphinx.

"Wherefore have you awakened?" he cried.

The Sphinx watched him, smiling strangely, and spoke no word. But the dryad said: "The Sphinx has awaked to behold the triumph of the god."

Alexis turned towards her, and saw that she was tall, and dazzling, and that her eyes were full of a great light of triumph. And Death called to the guests to trample on her, but they did not obey. He

flung a spear at her, and it flew wide and fell harmlessly at the feet of Erôs. Then the dryad turned to the window and looked out. "The day is breaking." she said. And all the guests echoed: "The day is breaking." And they began to stare about them like men who awake from heavy sleep. And the Sphinx rose, and advanced towards Death. Very slowly it advanced, and the guests fell back on each side as it came; and suddenly it sprang with the swiftness of light at the throat of Death. But because he was very strong he contrived to hurl the monster from him, and it crouched at his feet. And Death laughed, and shouted to the guests that he was invulnerable, and had conquered the evil beast. But even as he exulted, the golden bow of Erôs sounded like the note of a lyre, and Death staggered and fell, pierced to the heart with a golden arrow. And as soon as his great limbs touched the ground they diminished and grew thin, and dissolved before the eyes of the guests; and in a moment all that remained of the mighty master of the villa was a little dust that lay scattered amongst the pools of wine.

And the dryad cried: "King Death is dead; your king is slain by the arrow of Love and the monster that Pan has sent to avenge the gods. Rejoice,

O slaves of death who are free!" But the guests trembled, and muttered to one another, and crept away by twos and threes from the banqueting chamber. And the Sphinx let them go. And Alexis and the dryad released the bloated man, and he ran away without glancing at the girl who had been with him in the litter; and she lay where she had fallen when her dance was ended.

And when the guests had gone, and only Erôs and Alexis, and the dryad and the dancing-girl remained in the villa, the Sphinx lay down by the window and watched the dawn, and gradually its eyes became fixed, and its body again seemed to be translucent marble.

And Erôs went to the girl, who lay prone on the floor, and touched her hair, and she looked up at him, weeping. And he demanded to know why she wept, and she answered: "Because I am vile."

And Erôs pointed to the dead woman with the gilded breasts, and said: "Behold where vileness lies dead. Surely the God who comes shall have pity on you, because you fell at the feet of Love. Be comforted, for the new day is breaking."

He pointed to where the dawn was building her giant palace of pale rose. The gradual beauty of that

immense dome of colour was a heavenly vision to eyes that were aching from the fantastic pageants of so strange a vigil. As they watched, it seemed to them that the great sea stirred in its slumber, and that the voice of the tiny waves that broke in an even line along the sand had a new note. Suddenly the sun leapt up over the horizon, and all the birds began to sing. The Sphinx uttered a brief cry and its body trembled. The dryad leant forward eagerly, shading her eyes with her hand.

"He comes!" she cried: "He is far away, but I can see him; he walks very slowly, as if his feet were weary, but I know that it is he. Behold!"

The eyes of Alexis followed the direction of her hand. Far down the road a solitary figure was coming towards them. It moved so slowly that at first the lad imagined it to be standing still, but soon he realized that it drew near. A great awe fell on his heart, and he said: "Surely this is the God Pan, from whose wrath we fled, and now he will punish us for our flight." But when he looked at the dryad he saw that her face was full of a wonderful peace. And it seemed to him that the song of the birds swelled to a glorious anthem of gladness, that all the waves of the sea were gleaming with the light of a new and splendid

joy, and that the whole earth was thrilling with a welcome for him who came along the road so slowly, so wearily.

And Alexis said to himself: "This is the great God; but wherefore does he walk so sadly, and where are his goat's feet, and his shaggy limbs, and the reeded pipe whereon it is his wont to make wild music?"

And even as he whispered the words, a silence fell on the earth. And the wayfarer drew near to the villa that was once the villa of Death. When he was close to it he halted, and stood looking at those who had awaited his coming.

It was then that Alexis perceived that it was not Pan who came to him out of that marvellous daybreak. For the Stranger had the aspect of a mortal, and a mortal's weary eyes. And when he looked more closely at the wayfarer, Alexis saw that His feet and hands were wounded, and that on His brow was a crown of sharp thorns.

THE END

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